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# Leading Ideas



## | Mission as the Emerging Entry Point for New People

By Lovett H. Weems, Jr. On April 7, 2011

Leading Ideas

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It is intriguing that the first connection people have with a congregation tends to change from time to time. For churches with struggling adult Sunday Schools, it may be hard to imagine that for a long time the Sunday School was the most likely church entry point for most adults, as well as children and youth. Well into the 1950s in many denominations and regions, the most common invitation church members gave their new neighbors or co-workers was to attend their Sunday School class with them. It was not uncommon for church school attendance to run higher than worship attendance. In fact, the Sunday School sometimes seemed to receive more loyalty than the worship experience. This was particularly true on circuits where the Sunday School was an every Sunday experience while “preaching” occurred on a rotating schedule among the churches on the charge.

“ We may be on the verge of another change, in which the entry point to a congregation for more and more people is through service and mission. This seems especially true for the young.

Most of us are more familiar with the pattern that came next, in which the most likely first connection with a congregation was a worship service. People looking for a church on their own no longer came early to ask which Sunday School class they should attend but came first to a worship service. And church members inviting others to attend their church would now more likely invite newcomers to “worship” with us at our church. In this period the worship attendance in most churches pulled ahead, sometimes well ahead, of Sunday School attendance.

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We may be on the verge of another change, in which the entry point to a congregation for more and more people is through service and mission. This seems especially true for the young. For many young people, inviting their friends who don't attend church to "come to my church" may not be the most comfortable invitation to make or the one most likely to receive a positive response. On the other hand, few young people would be reluctant to invite any of their friends to join them for a service project sponsored by the church, and few young people will turn down such an invitation. The sense of commitment to help others among young adults is as strong as their excitement about most churches is weak.

It is too early to know if mission as an entry point to church will take hold in the way that Sunday School and worship did in prior times. But we do know that for increasing numbers of persons with a passion to serve and some disillusionment with the church, mission may be their most likely entry point – if churches are actually serving others and including new people in such service. We also know that, in this time when "belonging leads to believing," it is often only after a person comes to trust a community and to feel accepted by that community that there is much interest in what the community believes.

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About Author

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